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AUTHOR Green, Virginia P.; Schaefer, Lyn
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ABSTRACT

Teachers' beliefs about the probable classroom performances of children from broken homes were explored. The investigation had three purposes: (1) to obtain data on teachers' opinions and knowledge about children of divorce; (2) to investigate teachers' feelings about the school's role regarding children of divorce; and (3) to determine how two variables relate to teacher education about divorce: (a) number of years teachers had taught and (b) grade level taught. The 117 subjects were representative of teachers from across the nation. Survey data, which was derived from the administration of the Teacher Attitude toward Divorce and Role of the School questionnaire, revealed that teachers' opinions of children from broken homes and attitudes about their own roles in helping these children depended upon the divorce education the teachers had received. Divorce education for teachers varied from short presentations to complete courses. Teachers of younger children appeared to be more aware than others of the possibility of adjustment problems. Length of teaching experience did not seem to influence sensitivity to children of divorce. It is concluded that divorce education has a strong positive impact on teachers' attitudes about their responsibility to children from broken homes. However, this was true for teachers of children beyond the third grade only. (RH)

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The Effects of Teacher's Selected Educational Experiences on Perceptions of Children of Divorce

Virginia P. Green

Florida State University

Lyn Schaefer

American College Testing Program

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Abstract

Teachers' beliefs about the probable classroom performances of children from broken homes were explored. Surveys revealed that teachers' opinions of children from broken homes and teachers' attitudes about their own roles in helping these children depended upon the "divorce education" they had received. Teachers of younger children appeared to be more aware of the possibility of adjustment problems without additional divorce education training. Length of teaching experience did not seem to influence sensitivity to children of divorce.

Teacher's Perceptions of Children of Divorce from Selected Educational Experiences

Teachers' opinions of students begin to form prior to the students' entrance into the classroom (Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). These opinions are influenced by socio-economic status, scores on standardized tests, opinions of previous teachers, and the school reputation of older siblings. Teacher expectations affect children's classroom performances (Cooper & Tom, 1984; Palardy, 1969; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1985); when these expectations are based on stereotypes they may have negative effects.

Santrock and Tracy (1978) studies the effects of family composition on teachers' evaluations of children's personalities. A videotape showing the family and peer interactions of an 8-year-old boy was shown to teachers who were told either that the videotaped male child was from a divorced home or that he was from an intact home. The teachers who believed the boy was from a divorced home rated the child's level of happiness, emotional adjustment, and ability to cope with stress more negatively than the teachers who believed the boy was from an intact home.

Hodges and Ballantine conducted research in which twenty-six preschoolers from broken homes and twenty-six preschoolers from intact homes were rated by their teachers on emotional indices like aggression and withdrawal. The analysis showed that teachers who had previously felt that divorce had a profound impact on a child's behavior found no differences in behavior between the two groups, suggesting there was no basis for their stereotypical opinions.

Using a questionnaire format, Ball, Newman, and Scheuren (1984) surveyed teachers on their opinions of the adjustment of male and female children from broken or intact homes. They found teachers rated children, especially boys, from broken homes lower on academic achievement, parental involvement, and emotional adjustment.

Blechman (1982) concluded after reviewing the existing literature that teachers seem to judge children's performances not on their observations of the child but on their knowledge of the child's family background, and that therefore teacher ratings of a child's behavior or performance would not be valid.

More recently, Guttman, Geva, and Gefen (1988) expanded on the Santrock and Tracy study, using both teachers and students to rate the academic, social, and emotional functioning of male and female children of divorce. Their results indicated that teachers viewed divorce as having adverse effects on 3 types of functioning (academic, social and emotional) contrary to the findings of others (Ball, Newman, & Scheuren, 1984; Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981), these adverse effects were found to be the same for male and female students.

Blechman's objections to teacher ratings of children from broken homes, furthered by more recent research (Guttman, Geva, and Gefen) prompted this investigation into the feelings, opinions, and knowledge teachers have about children of divorce. The investigation had three purposes. These were: (1) to obtain data on teachers' opinions and knowledge about children of divorce, (2) to investigate teachers' feelings about the school's role in regard to children of divorce, and (3) to determine how 2 variables relate to Teacher Education about divorce: (a) length of years taught and (b) grade level

taught.

Methods and Procedures

Subjects: The 117 subjects were representative of teachers from across the nation. Ninety-one percent of the subjects were females. Information on grade levels taught, years of teaching experience, and inservice or preservice divorce education is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Divorce education for teachers varied from short presentations to complete semester- or quarter-length courses. These sessions were designed to help teachers better understand the problems associated with divorce and separation.

Instrumentation: In group settings the subjects were administered the Teacher Attitude Toward Divorce and Role of the School, an instrument developed by the researchers. It consisted of 37 questions using Likert scaling, as well as a demographic section composed of 15 questions. The 37 questions formed 3 categories: (1) knowledge about divorce in the United States and its effects on children, (2) opinions on divorce, and (3) the role of the school in working with children of divorce. The reliability was 0.87.

Results and Discussion

A series of 3 way analyses of variance (teaching level x years teaching x divorce education) were employed to determine the effects on teacher opinion, teacher role and teacher knowledge about children of divorce.

Teacher Opinion

Teacher opinion as to whether or not children of divorce had unique problems and needs was influenced mainly by the grade level taught by the teacher. Teachers of younger children tended to be more aware of the possibility of unique problems. This effect ($F(3, 90) = 3.22$, $p < .03$) indicated that teachers working at preschool through grade three levels held the opinion that most children of divorce had special problems and needs. The teachers of older children did not share this belief. A possible explanation of this finding is the greater frequency of interaction between teachers and children in preschool through grade three. Also, empirical findings have shown that younger children suffer more often from adjustment problems than older children (Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981). Kurdek and Siesky (1980) have suggested that older children adjust more easily because they were less likely to blame themselves for problems. Older children also tended to discuss problems with peers who were often in the same situation.

The impact of divorce education was clear with regard to teachers' opinions. With the exception of K-3 teachers, who seemed to recognize the needs of children from broken homes without any type of divorce education, teachers who had divorce education were more likely to be aware of the unique needs and problems of children of divorce ($F(2, 90) = 3.28$, $p < .05$).

Teacher and School Role

Of the children from broken homes studied by Hammond (1979), 86% wanted to talk about their divorce experiences with school personnel; eighty-two percent wanted a school counseling group to help them adjust. The present study indicated that a difference existed between teachers with divorce education

and those without ($F(1, 96) = 3.96$, $p < .05$) in regard to the role of the school in helping children from broken homes: Teachers with divorce education felt schools should assume a strong role in providing children of divorce with special assistance; those without divorce education did not share this opinion.

Non K-3 teachers who had received divorce education and K-3 teachers with and without divorce education agreed that the teacher's role and responsibilities should include special assistance to children of divorce ($F(2, 96) = 3.57$, $p < .04$). It may be that K-3 teachers without formal divorce education, due to their close working contact with children and parents have incorporated these teacher behaviors as part of their normal interactions with young children. Therefore, they see no need for extra teacher effort.

Teacher Knowledge

Surprisingly, divorce education had little influence on teacher knowledge of divorce facts and statistics ($F(1, 83) = .06$, $p < .05$). Regardless of teaching level, years of teaching, or divorce education, teachers did not differ significantly in their knowledge of divorce facts and figures. Since the statistics and other facts concerning divorce are changing so frequently, divorce education classes may be excluding these facts from course content.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most dramatic conclusion one could make from this study is that divorce education had a strong positive impact on teachers' perception of children of divorce and teachers' attitudes about their responsibility to children from broken homes. This was true only for teachers above the 3rd

grade level, however, one limitation in this study was the lack of information on the content and length of the different divorce education classes attended by teachers. The assumption was that for most of these teachers divorce education consisted of an inservice workshop.

It was noteworthy that years of teaching was not related to teacher opinions, teacher role, or teacher knowledge about children of divorce, suggesting that the perceptions held by the beginning teacher do not differ greatly from those of teachers with extensive experience. It had been hypothesized that teachers' opinions and attitudes about children of divorce would be influenced by the length of contact with these children. However, this study suggests that teacher attitudes, once formulated, did not change as a result of increased experience with these children.

The teachers' opinions and school role attitudes seemed to polarize them into 2 groups: the K-3 teachers and the teachers of other grades. The K-3 teachers were much more likely to be aware of the possibility of unique difficulties and adjustments faced by children of divorce. As was mentioned earlier, divorce education was beneficial to the non K-3 teachers in increasing their awareness.

In summary, the impacts of teachers' expectations are long-lasting. Since teachers' expectations influence performance, teachers should not assume all children of divorce will have problems with learning and social adjustment. Divorce need not cause academic and behavioral problems. Through divorce education, teachers might gain an awareness that there may be problems, but that they should beware of expecting problems.

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Table 1

Distribution of Teachers by

Teaching Level, Years Teaching, and Divorce Education

Teaching Level	
Preschool	5%
K - 3	32%
4 - 6	23%
7 - 12	7%
Other	33%
Years Teaching	
0 - 2	19%
3 - 5	30%
6 - 10	30%
11 - 15	11%
16 - 20	5%
21 +	5%
Divorce Education	
Had preparation	13%
No preparation	87%